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OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

C O N D U C T

OF THE

PROTESTANT DISSENTERS.

—
SECOND EDITION.
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OBSERVATIONS

CONDUCT

OF THE



PROCEEDINGS

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OF THE

TO THE

RIGHT REVEREND FATHER IN GOD,

G E O R G E,

LORD BISHOP OF LINCOLN.

MY LORD,

IN offering the following pages to
your Lordship's protection, I have
been influenced by a double motive;---

a pro-

6 DEDICATION.

a profound personal esteem, --- and a knowledge of your firm attachment to the principles and welfare of the *National Church*, of which you are a pillar and an ornament. Induced solely by a similar attachment to obtrude my sentiments on the public, and encouraged by an ardent wish to stimulate abler pens to support the cause I have brought forwards; I flatter myself I shall obtain that indulgence from your Lordship's candour which I cannot venture to hope from your judgment. Common justice to your Lordship requires that I should declare, I have published without consulting or communicating with you upon the subject. I should be extremely unwilling to involve in my errors a *name*, which
I,

DEDICATION.

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I, in common with the publick, hold
in the highest respect. I have the
honour to be,

My Lord,

Your Lordship's

most dutiful,

and most obedient servant,

The AUTHOR.

OBSERVATIONS

ON THE CONDUCT OF THE

PROTESTANT DISSENTERS.

THE present age is distinguished by liberality of sentiment, and a spirit of toleration. This is one of the many advantages arising from the general diffusion of knowledge. When learning and philosophy have cultivated the mind, it rises superior to the narrow restraints of prejudice, and disdains the feeble policy of extorting apparent consent to any particular system by real coercion. Of all the outrages of bigotry and despotism, those are most justly and most generally reprobated which are levelled against religion, and affect to exercise dominion over the consciences of men. The care of his soul is a concern of too much importance to every individual, who is capable of thinking and reflecting, to be entrusted to any other hands but his own. When his opinions on that subject are once formed, and

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established on the basis of conviction, neither the menaces of authority, nor the dread of punishment, can affect his decision. They may induce him, indeed, to conceal those sentiments which it would not be prudent to avow:—but the right of opinion is a natural right, and cannot be superseded by any human tribunal. It is to God alone that we are responsible for our religious tenets; and nothing but the most extravagant excess of arrogance could induce one fallible being to dictate to another on a subject where error may be fatal, and both may be wrong. But in civil matters the case is widely different. Every body of men, that has framed itself into a society, has a clear and indisputable right to establish certain rules, to be observed by all those who are willing to be admitted into it. An assent to some particular mode of faith, a concurrence in some particular religious rites, is perhaps the best and most effectual bond that can be devised for civil union. Whether the system adopted be right or wrong, is a matter of no political consequence. It is sufficient for all the purposes of government, that the members of the establishment believe it to be right. Those who entertain different opinions can have no reason to complain, while they are allowed the free exercise of private judgment, and permitted to worship the Supreme Being in that way which they conceive to be most worthy of him, and of themselves.

selves. In the infinite diversity of religions, which the Creator has permitted to prevail in the world, the majority of voices must influence government in their choice. They can be determined by no other criterion. Supported by superior numbers, dissension becomes establishment; and establishment without that aid sinks into dissension.

In the series of revolutions by which this country has been distracted, the national religion has changed with the times: it has at different periods been Catholic, Presbyterian, and Episcopal. It is the nature of those in power to demand submission; of those who are not in power, to claim indulgence. The real principles of a party, like the real character of an individual, can never be thoroughly known till it is invested with authority. It is no uncommon case for those, who when struggling against superior force have displayed the meekness of apostles, and the fortitude of martyrs, to change their characters as they change their situation. When they had openly possessed themselves of that power, for which they had long secretly sighed, the mild apologists of toleration have been transformed into furious, unrelenting, and sanguinary bigots. In their turn they have erected the scaffold, and lighted the pile: they have revelled in all the infernal horrors of religious persecution. It will be unnecessary to look abroad for the cruel

proofs of this assertion. Our domestic history furnishes us with ample testimony to the fact. And facts, taken from domestic history, have a double advantage : they interest the feelings, and are easily ascertained. The horrors which have been experienced in a remote period, and a distant country, affect the mind but feebly in comparison with those which have been recently felt, and felt at home. From the former we may flatter ourselves that we are exempted by local situation, or peculiar circumstances ; from a repetition of the latter, we know that nothing but our own vigilance can protect us.

Every religious sect has a ruling principle, which, however artfully concealed while the members of it are condemned to obscurity and submission, breaks forth with added vigour when they are enabled to seize the reins of government. That sect of Christians, which is at present called the Church of England, whatever other imperfections it may labour under, cannot justly be accused of being governed by a spirit of persecution. It may be lukewarm, but it has never been intolerant. Of the spirit of Popery it is unnecessary to speak. Experience, whose decisions can never be controverted, has exhibited it in its native colours. Cruel and deceitful,—turbulent and faithless,—blind and oppressive ; its character is now so well known, that it scarcely
finds

finds an enlightened adherent in this enlightened country.

The Protestant Dissenters, who are sufficiently numerous at present, and not likely to be less so, may perhaps be surprized to be told, that in many particulars a fatal resemblance subsists between them and their detested rivals:—if a fallen sect may be called the rivals of a rising one. Extremes have a tendency to meet. The same bold designs, the same artful conduct, the same inveterate animosity, the same unwearied exertions to make proselytes, the same unjustifiable attempts to intimidate those whom they cannot persuade, which once characterized the Papist, are now transferred to the Dissenter. With toleration in his mouth, and persecution in his heart, the sectarist, who in his writings and his conversation stands forth as the advocate of the rights of mankind, forgets them in his practice. In his family, no freedom of opinion is allowed: in his commerce with the world, no protection or countenance is afforded to those who are of a different persuasion. His servants, in whatever religious principles they have been bred, are seduced or forced to the conventicle; and, if he would not forego the necessaries, he would at least relinquish many of the comforts of life, rather than purchase them of a churchman. From his domestic conduct, we may form some idea of what his public principles

principles would be, should the mutability of human affairs lodge power in his hands. This is no vain speculation, no declamatory invective. We have seen the Presbyterians and other sectarists in power; and whoever wishes to know their real sentiments on the subject of *toleration*, may find them faithfully depicted by a hand, whose representations I should suppose they were unwilling to contradict;—I mean *their own*. If we turn to the celebrated ordinance which was passed 23d August 1645, and was continued in force till the Restoration, we shall find it there enacted, that to preach, write, or print any thing in derogation, or depraving, the Directory for the then established Presbyterian worship, subjected the offender upon an indictment to a discretionary fine, not exceeding *fifty pounds*; and moreover, by the same ordinance, was inflicted *imprisonment for a year* on the third offence; and pecuniary penalties on the former two, in case of using the Book of Common Prayer, not only in a place of public worship, but also in any *private family*! an ordinance dictated by the genius of *Popery*, and worthy of the Inquisition in the most barbarous times!

The apologists for the Dissenters will probably observe, that the sentiments of the party are at present of a more liberal cast. Perhaps they may be so; for they are not in power. But were they

they at this moment elevated to the station they then possessed, they give us too much reason to fear, that the tyranny and intolerance which are now confined to their families would again be extended to the nation at large. It is not from professions that we must judge of the integrity or designs of men: we must mark their conduct, and see to what objects it tends.

That of the Dissenters, at present, wears a more open and decided air than they are accustomed to assume. The public prints are crowded with their advertisements, complaining of grievances which do not exist, and demanding privileges to which they have no pretensions. To men who claim imaginary rights, it is a sufficient answer to oppose rights that are real. It has been observed, by one of the first and most disinterested Lawyers * this country has ever produced, that "the civil magistrate is bound to protect the Established Church; and, if this can be better effected by admitting none but its genuine members to offices of trust and emolument, he is certainly at liberty so to do; the disposal of offices being matter of *favour and discretion*." With respect to the nature of the test required, it must appear to every unprejudiced mind, that a religious test is the surest and most proper criterion of religious principles. Notwithstanding the

* Sir William Blackstone.

the loud and illiberal invectives of the Dissenters, there is nothing indecent or improper, no wanton prophanation of a sacred rite, in making it necessary to partake of it, as a qualification for a civil office. It is no more than requiring a solemn pledge, from the person to be invested with magistracy or public employment, of his sincere attachment to the national church. As a member of that church, he is bound, by every tie of decency and conscience, frequently to assist at the communion. Of his motives, it is not the province of man to judge. Nor is it fair or candid to suppose that he never communicates, except when it is necessary as a legal qualification. The Legislature, in erecting this bulwark against Papists and other sectarists, was not perhaps aware, that there existed men base enough to mock heaven, for the sake of deceiving their country *. *Occasional conformity*, which to the disgrace

*The following authentic anecdote, though perhaps foreign to the argument, may serve to illustrate the sentiments of some of the dissenting clergy, I hope not all of them, on the subject of *occasional conformity*. In the ancient and religious corporation of B——t—l, every body knows there are some members who have a little bias towards the *conventicle*. Not many years ago, it happened that these gentlemen had a particular point to carry, which made it expedient for them to have a mayor of their own party. The person chosen for this purpose, though desirous of serving the cause, by some unlucky accident had *real* scruples of conscience about qualifying. In this dilemma, he applied to the teacher of the congregation he frequented, for advice. The pastor,

grace of the Dissenters, originated among themselves, is one of the most abject, the most infamous, the most blasphemous prostitutions of conscience at the shrine of ambition, that the annals of human wickedness can boast. Yet, if we allow ourselves to argue against the use of things from their abuse, where shall we draw the line? Oaths may be called the occasion of perjury,—laws of crimes,—religion of hypocrisy and impiety. But shall we therefore reject the security of oaths, the protection of laws, and the benefits of religion?

The Dissenters seem particularly anxious to assure us, that no danger is to be apprehended to the State, from admitting them to a free participation of public offices. But it is absurd to intrust any set of men with power upon their simple assurance that they do not intend to abuse

pastor, being one of those, who in their generation are wiser than the children of light, assured his disciple that he might very safely communicate with the Church of England, without violating his principles or injuring his conscience. He supported his assertion with such strong arguments as in the end prevailed. The magistrate qualified, the point agitated in the corporation was carried; but at the expiration of his office he neglected to return to the meeting. Alarmed at the desertion, the pious pastor again conferred with his former disciple, and endeavoured to unwind the arguments he had before so ingeniously woven, but in vain: the solid reasons he alleged in his first conversation prevailed over the sophistry of the second, and he was never able to recover the lost sheep.

it. The publick has a right to demand stronger pledges of their fidelity. When a sectarist declares, as they affect to declare with much solemnity in their pompous advertisements, that he is a friend to the constitution, he either deceives himself, or utters a gross falsehood. Our ecclesiastical and civil establishment are so indissolubly blended, that it is impossible to separate them without injury to both. He, therefore, who is inimical to the Church, cannot be friendly to the State: and since the King is the head of the Church, cannot be friendly to the King. Of the zeal of the Dissenters for the *good* of their country we have ample proofs, when we recollect who it was that projected, supported, and compleated, the *Grand Rebellion*,—who it was that voted the House of Peers useless,—brought their monarch to the scaffold,—and the nation to disgrace. Of their loyalty, their boasted loyalty to the House of Brunswick, who can doubt, that remembers the industry with which they fomented the revolt of the Americans, the arguments they supplied, and the intelligence with which they furnished them?—It was the loyal, the dutiful, the liberal Dissenters, and their adherents, who, to gratify their malevolence, assisted the enemies of their country in dismembering the empire. Yet these are the men who solemnly assure us*, “that

* See Resolutions of the Protestant Dissenters, at Exeter, October 1, 1789.

"they maintain no principles, and have done
 "nothing, as a body, that can justly render
 "them unworthy the confidence of Government;
 "that they have ever been zealously attached to
 "the civil constitution of their country, which
 "they have always been forward to defend
 "whenever it has been in danger; and are, and
 "ever have been, strenuous supporters of all
 "the Princes of the royal House of Brunswick."

It is one of their favourite topics of complaint, that the exclusion from public offices, on account of their refusal to comply with the test, is a mark of disgrace. If it be so, it may afford them some consolation to reflect that they share it in common with the heirs to his Majesty's throne, which, as the law now stands, they can never ascend till they have given the same public testimony of their religious principles.

But while a wounded conscience and insulted feelings are the specious pretences, ambition and enmity to the Established Church are the real causes that stimulate their exertions. Our indolence, and their activity, may one day prove fatal to the Ecclesiastical Constitution. Animated by a spirit of unwearied perseverance, they depend no less for success upon their own strength, than

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upon the support of those careless or disaffected members of the church whom they are able to cajole or blind by liberal promises and artful professions. They know but too well, that in great and difficult enterprizes it is necessary to encounter obstacles singly, and in succession; that they should neither be intimidated by their number nor their magnitude; that it is a weakness to despair of accomplishing whatever lies within the bounds of possibility; and that many of those things, which appear impracticable to a superficial observer, are easily attained by those who have sufficient judgment and skill to take advantages of times and opportunity, to profit by their own vigilance, and the oversights of their adversary. In every contest minorities possess some advantages which an able leader will turn to good account. They move with unanimity and decision, their designs are fixed, their resolution formed before they begin to act; while that side, which boasts superior strength of numbers, is tempted by that very circumstance to sink into negligence and security.

That the Sectarists of the present day have formed some deep * and extensive project, is evident

* Among the many symptoms which indicate a settled plan of innovation, we may reckon the new Academical Institution

dent from the honest, but perhaps injudicious and premature, declaration of Dr. Priestley: that active and inveterate enemy of our Establishment assures them, "that their silent propagation of the truth would in the end prove efficacious; that they were wisely placing as it were grain by grain a train of gunpowder, to which the match would one day be laid, to blow up the *fabrick of error*, which could never be again raised on the same foundation." From his conduct, and that of his partizans, there is every reason to suppose, that by the fabric of error is meant the Church of England; and, to pursue the Doctor's metaphor, which by the way is rather unhappily chosen from the Gunpowder-Plot, the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts seems the most effectual mode of applying the match to the train. Should they ever be enabled to accomplish that point, the Church "may bid a long farewell to all its greatness." The period they have chosen for their exertions is selected with great judgment. As the present Parliament is hastening to its dissolution, they must use every endeavour to procure in the next a majority of members pro-

in the neighbourhood of London; which, however laudable in itself, could we consider it merely as an attempt to introduce a better system of education, should, on account of its obvious political tendency, be regarded by government with a vigilant, and even jealous eye.

pitious

pitious to their principles, their projects, and their wishes. The meetings which they have formed in every part of the kingdom, the regular correspondence maintained between these provincial assemblies and that which is held in the metropolis, the repeated assertions of their determination not to give their support to any candidates but those who will pledge themselves to vote for the repeal of the obnoxious acts, are plain proofs of their resolution to try their strength at the ensuing election. So far at least their conduct has the merit of being open and manly; yet it seems extraordinary that the professed advocates of civil liberty should establish one test while they are endeavouring to procure the repeal of another. That they will be successful in some parts of the kingdom, principally in the cities and boroughs, is highly probable; in those seats of opulence and schism their strength principally lies. Men who have been bred to trade, particularly the inferior branches of it, are very apt to become latitudinarians in the Church, and levellers in the State. Detesting those distinctions to which they were not born, and envying that independence which they have never enjoyed, they seek for every opportunity of mortifying the great, and reducing the clergy to the precarious subsistence of voluntary contribution. Modern philosophy, indeed, boasts much
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of the liberality of sentiment diffused by commerce ; but speculative philosophers are not always the best judges of fact ; and perhaps the picture drawn by the elegant author of the following lines, though not a flattering likeness, is very near the truth :

- “ Now more destructive than a blighting storm,
 “ A bloated monster, Commerce, rears her form ;
 “ Throws the meek olive from her daring hand,
 “ Grasps the red sword, and whirls the flaming brand ;
 “ *True to no faith, by no restraints controul’d ;*
 “ By guilt made cautious, and by avarice bold.
 “ Can this be she, who promis’d once to bind,
 “ In leagues of lasting amity, mankind ?
 “ *This fiend, whose breath inflames the spark of strife,*
 “ And pays with trivial joys the price of life ?”

But I trust, that even in the commercial world, among the busy haunts of men, there is still a large majority attached to our church from principle and conviction. They who are really so, and warmed with an honest zeal for the prosperity of their country and their religion, will not shrink from the present contest, but will resolutely accept the challenge which the sectarists have hurled in their teeth.

The landed interest and the clergy are bound by the ties of prudence, as well as those of duty,

to summon all their powers to the contest. Let them remember, "that a house divided against itself cannot stand." While the advocates of a bad cause are distinguished for their unanimity, their vigour and perseverance, it will be doubly disgraceful for those, who are patrons of a good one, to be deficient in those requisites from which alone it can hope for support. Should they suffer the present opportunity to escape, it will never return. They may lament those evils which they cannot remedy, and rue the fatal hour when they surrendered their liberties and their consciences into the hands of those who, under the mask of friendship, betrayed them to their ruin. If the Dissenters gain a majority in the ensuing Parliament, what security remains for the national religion? Should they act as honest men, they will be desirous of establishing that mode of faith which they believe to be the best—and, should they act otherwise, to what excesses may they not proceed? Even now, we find them restless, intriguing, and aspiring. Enjoying every indulgence, civil and religious, that reasonable men can require, it is *the spirit of ambition* that beckons them on to bolder undertakings; it is *the spirit of ambition* that prompts them to aim at obtaining an influence in Parliament, and to seek dominion while they pretend to ask redress.

Whatever

Whatever may be the event in the House of Commons, we have fortunately other resources left. The hereditary counsellors of the crown do not depend for their existence on the suffrages of the people; they must have little wisdom or little spirit if they submit to become the tools of a party which still abhor, and once annihilated, their order. Equally enlightened, and in some respects more independent than the Commons, they will be enabled to stem the torrent of popular phrenzy. From the example of France they have received a lesson which must sink deep into their hearts; from the distractions of that unhappy country they have learnt the necessity of resisting every step that may tend, however remotely, to hazard the degradation of their dignity. When the nobility and clergy of that once flourishing country so far forgot their rank, as to submit to sit in the assembly, and be melted into the mass of the Commons, they threw down the last barrier of the ancient constitution. Should the temporal and spiritual peers of this country consent to the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts, they will be guilty of a similar error. By admitting Dissenters of every description into the offices of state, they will transfer the power from their own hands into those of their bitterest enemies, and sow the seeds of some future, though not distant, revolution.

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But should the peers be tempted to sacrifice the interests of their country to the dread of censure and invective,—should they compliment away the constitution, of which we are now so justly proud, for fear of incurring the odium of those who feel interested in its destruction,—if his Majesty has one minister about his court who feels a spark of patriotism, or an emotion of religion, he will advise and implore his sovereign to rescue us from ruin, by interposing his negative. For the misguided monarch, if such a monarch should ever arise, who shall be prevailed upon to give his assent to the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts, will feel the crown sliding from his brow, and precipitate the sceptre from the hands of his descendants.

This may appear harsh language, but it is the language of truth. In submitting these sentiments to the publick, I am well aware that I shall incur the hatred of many, and the censure of more. To hatred or to censure I am by no means callous: but my sense of duty is stronger than my fears. I feel that the welfare of my country which I love, of the church to which I am attached from conviction, is at stake. Conscious that my voice is feeble, yet under such circumstances I should deem, it criminal to be silent. Should I be fortunate enough at this im-

portant crisis to call the attention of my countrymen to an object, on which the future stability of the constitution depends, I shall feel a satisfaction which criticism cannot deprive me of, nor panegyrick bestow.

[F I N I S .



